Survival Skills
Toronto Festival of Preaching
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One of the books everybody has read and talked about recently is Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*. Taylor is an Episcopal Priest, began her ministry in an urban parish in downtown Atlanta; then moved to Grace Calvary Church in the Northern Georgia Mountains: and recently left parish ministry to teach humanities at Piedmont College, a small liberal arts college in Georgia.

She is the author of many books. She has a poet's sense of the Word and words, writes elegantly, speaks even more elegantly. She speaks, preaches, lectures at every important conference in the land it seems. She is certainly one of my mentors – along with thousands of others.

So why in the world did she leave? And write a book about it with a picture on the book jacket of a white dove flying out of a bird cage with the door wide open – as if ministry – her ministry at least – became a kind of captivity? She's a good friend, and I mean to ask her about that book jacket sometime – although I suspect I know the answer and it is that her ministry in the parish became a kind of captivity. And that one of the issues for all of us is how to stay with it over time – to stay healthy and reasonably happy.

I suppose we've all thought about it at one time or another – life outside. And I suppose many if not most of us have decided to be a minister not once, but many times.

For one thing – there is the Church, the institution with all its creaky structures to maintain and elaborate paraphernalia. Many of us spent a fair amount of our preparation for ministry critiquing what we loved to call the "Institutional Church" as if there were any other kind except in the heart and imagination of God. And then we got into it, served on judicatory committees, task forces, attended meetings, rubbed shoulders with other people, some of whom, amazingly, had spent their entire ministries inside the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. And then we got caught up in one of the great divisive issues of the day, homosexuality, for instance, and whether the Church should ordain gay and lesbian Christians who know themselves called by God to service, and it wore us out and broke our heart, just about the time the old creaky structures appeared to be literally coming apart.

"The ministry did not meet my expectation," Barbara Brown Taylor says. "I had thought I would spend a lot of time in a big leather chair, studying the bible and theology when I was not writing sermons or counseling parishioners.

"Instead, I spent most of my time essentially managing a small business, with all of the fiscal, physical plant, and personal issues that such a job entails."

It's the easiest target in the world, the Church is. It always has been. Among human institutions, and whether or not you believe God has something to do with it, calls it into being, nurtures, inspires and protects it, the Church is also human – utterly, sinfully human.

And now, to make matters worse, the sociologists are assuring us that modern — or postmodern — religion is not only post denominational, maybe post Christian, but also an entirely individual matter, not institutional at all. We are a nation of "Seekers" not "Joiners" Wade Clark Roof taught us. Spirituality is where it's at — as the Religion and Philosophy department at Borders testifies — a private, personal quest for meaning, purpose, happiness, God, that has nothing to do with church. When Jennifer brings Kevin to my study to plan the wedding he tells me, "I'm spiritual — very spiritual . . . I'm just not religious, haven't been in church for years." When the family gathers to plan Bill's Memorial Service, four post modern young adults, successful, affluent, they say, without embarrassment, "We'd like to keep
this religious stuff to a minimum, Reverend," by which they mean stuff like hymns, scripture, prayers. What they want is three tributes and music by Eric Clapton — "a send off for Dad," and the relationship to the institution is only as the hall they've rented to do it in.

Nobody, however, is more critical of church than people who love it, work in it, serve in it — have high hopes for it — have a life-long lover's quarrel with it.

Author Annie Dillard, baptized a Presbyterian, now a Roman Catholic . . . "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ came the Christians (The Church). Who can believe in them?" (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn, p. 36).

Will Willimon, parish pastor, Duke Chaplain, a Methodist Bishop, now back at Duke Divinity School, "Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved . . . For most of us the church is an embarrassment" (*What's Right with the Church*, p. 3).

Bill Gates, richest man in the world and thus granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well: "Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."

It's a risky business, ministry is. A friend of mine, Eileen Lindner, in her book, *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*, tells a story about the day she wore her new pulpit robe for the first time:

> "When I was ordained some thirty years ago very few women were ordained in the Presbyterian church. The pulpit robe company didn't make women's pulpit robes so my home church had a robe made for me. Anyway, it was Christmastime. I wore my fancy robe (for the first time). I was a little full of myself. It was an Advent service and we had an Advent wreath. I called a young girl to light the candles in the Advent wreath, and I did what pastors do. I gave her exceedingly exact directions. I said to her: "When the time comes, I'll nod. You come down, light the candle, then turn, blow out the match without blowing out the candle, and go sit down."
>
> The time came. "I nodded, she came down and did exactly as I told her, and as I moved over to the Advent wreath, she said in a very clear voice, 'Careful, Reverend, don't set your bathrobe on fire.'"

Eileen says being a minister is to live and work close to the flames — close to the heat and passion and tragedy and exultation, close to pain and loss as well as unbelievable joy, of human life. People invite us into their lives at a level accessible to no one else. They tell us things they tell no one else, things we must never tell — even our spouses: things we carry around in our hearts all our lives. They call us when they lose their job or when a spouse dies. They come see us to tell us sex is no longer interesting; they come to announce that they can't believe in God: that their teenager is doing cocaine. They come to us to bury their dead and marry their children. They expect us to spend Friday night at the rehearsal party — trying to look interested as one fraternity brother after another, under the influence of free booze stands up and describes the sexual exploits of the groom in far more detail than anyone really wants to know, followed by a series of sorority sisters, not to be outdone by the guys, telling us that the bride is no slouch either. They want us and we need to be there through most of the next day — Saturday — the biggest day in their lives: the service, the endless wait while the photographer goes to work because they want you in your robe in the last one, then the cocktail party and reception dinner where you find yourself seated beside Aunt Gertrude from Vermont who is hard of hearing.

They want us to be by their hospital beds when they or their loved ones are critically ill: they invite us into that most intimate space in all of human life — the time when it comes to an end. In Richard Lischer's

wonderful memoir, *Open Secrets*, he describes a situation we have all been in: drives 50 miles to a critical care facility to say a prayer over a comatose patient. "Who sees this act and calls it good?" Lischer asks.

They tell us they love our preaching so much they turn us into addicts, hooked on post worship compliments: and they devastate us with criticism just when we are most vulnerable. They scold us for not condemning the war more forcefully and for criticizing the President. They email us that they're canceling their pledge because of what we said, or didn't say, about homosexuality: or they've decided to transfer to another church (they mean preacher) because they find so profoundly distasteful this or that.

They watch our families and discuss our compensation. They know what kind of car we drive and where we go on vacation.

And, remarkably, they not only allow us into their lives, they come week after week and sit quietly and listen to us talk. If there is a more astonishing fact and a more unlikely honor than that — I don't know what it might be.

Describing her struggle with the decision to become a priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> "Being a priest seemed only slightly less dicey to me than being chief engineer at a nuclear plant. In both cases, one needed to know how to approach great power without loosing great danger and getting fried in the process."

And so — some thoughts on how to do it without setting your robe on fire — or getting fried in the nuclear meltdown.

There is a whole literature on this topic. Here are six guidelines I offer.

1. <u>Take care of yourself</u>.

Duke Divinity School did a research project on clergy health and discovered – no surprise – that it isn't very good. Clergy are not generally very healthy.

Our diet is generally atrocious, we don't exercise enough, we are overweight – and for a variety of reasons we register high on the job-stress scale: all of which is a prescription for a health crisis.

Some of us have served congregations in which a few of our members took it on themselves to stuff us with food. In fact, in some places in the

states it is a popular caricature of the local minister: “Can that man eat! Have another piece of pie, Reverend!”

Our work is sedentary. We now know that sitting at a desk for long periods of time, uninterrupted, is not good. So – stop it! Learn how to say “no” and for God’s sake, if not your spouse and children’s, get into a regular routine of exercise: run, bike, swim, walk – regularly.

Do not be a literalist about Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s invitation to follow Christ and die, unless the Nazis take over again. Until that happens get enough sleep, eat right, exercise regularly – and, most important of all – pay attention to your life-giving relationships – with your spouse and children.

Do not miss one-time events in your children’s lives because of a church meeting. I did it for years and it was killing me, making me guilty and sad. I stopped when the oldest child approached Jr. High and never looked back. Learn to say, “I can’t be there because my daughter is playing first violin in the school concert” or “I’ll have to leave this meeting at 4:00 because my son is starting at center at 4:30.” You can not only get away with it, your people will appreciate your modeling sanity, and responsible parenting.

One of the insidious dynamics in the business is that sometimes people let us know that they think ministry is not hard work, that we have it pretty easy. “What do you do the other six days of the week, Reverend?” They smile, but you know they truly think you don’t have a real job. Don’t try to prove them wrong, or prove yourself, by working harder and longer than anyone else. It won’t work anyhow, and you’ll do damage to yourself and your family.

That’s first. <u>Take care of yourself</u>.

2. <u>Pay the rent</u>.
It’s an old idea – from James Dittes who used to teach at Yale. His book, , now out of print I assume, is a classic on the practice of ministry.

“The Rent,” Dittes says, is the same for every parish church regardless of size.

a. Make sure the budget is balanced and bills paid
b. Make sure the furnace works and the sidewalks are shoveled
c. Make sure your people know you are available and will be there when they need you
d. Pay enough attention to sermon preparation that your people won’t be embarrassed when they bring their friends to church.

Paying the Rent is not full-time work, Dittes, said. But it must be paid, and once it is paid you are free to do other things.

3. Don't marry a clergy spouse or have preacher's kids.

If your spouse wants to be deeply involved in the church, fine. That's his or her business, personal vocational business. But it does not come along with either the marriage covenant or the congregation's call to you to be its pastor. If it does, you might want to rethink it.

And do not have expectations of your children because of what you do for a living – anymore than anyone else. If your children ever say "We're P.K.s – i.e. Preacher's Kids – wash their mouths out with soap.

4. Praise your predecessor at every opportunity. Particularly if your predecessor was much loved. If he/she was not, was, in fact, asked to leave – you have nothing to worry about here. In fact you have a gift of grace. You will be loved, at least at first, because you are not him/her.

This one could be first. I like it a lot because I am retired and about to be someone's predecessor.

Some people will never believe you can live up to dear Dr. So and So…Agree with them. Forget about it.

5. Give sermon preparation the time and priority it deserves.

Many of us find ourselves so busy with the other responsibilities of ministry that sermon preparation essentially gets whatever is left over, and in many weeks that isn't very much. It is, of course, exactly backwards, 180° wrong.

I'm a Presbyterian, my ecclesiastical home is the Reformed Tradition with an emphasis on the Theology of the Word. Preaching, for me, is central. it is not the only thing I am called to do, but it is, by far, the most important thing. And so, I have always given it first priority when it comes to budgeting my time.

Here, for what it is worth, is how I did it – not at all original or particularly unique.

1 – It begins with the disciplined practice of reading. Read, read, read, everything: current novels, journals, magazines, newspapers and attend to the important rigorous texts being written by the best of our thinkers.

I could only do this when away from daily responsibility: winter break, summer.

Keep a notebook on file of all the gems you have discovered.

2 – Plan ahead.
Read the lectionary for every Sunday for 6 months to a year.

Start a notebook page or file folder for each – with the lections, initial thoughts, collected items – let it ferment – add to it – identify a preaching theme for each.

3 – Weekly Discipline
- Monday: texts – morning
- Tuesday: early – identify and organize ancillary resources
- Wednesday: all morning – read, outline, create key ideas -
- Thursday: a.m. – write it
- Friday: early – refine it
- Saturday: night – read it
- Sunday: early – preach it in the kitchen and leave time for last minute revisions (some of the best)

You must carve out time – or, better said, arrange the rest of your week around this. Tell your people about it – you'll be studying Wednesday morning and writing Thursday morning. You'll be in the office by noon. Unless you're near death don't call me until then.

6. <u>Finally</u>
Remember – in the midst of it all – the Grace you proclaim is for you, too.
- the forgiveness you assure them God extends, is for you, too
- the love of God from which nothing, not even death, you tell them at their most desperate and vulnerable moments, is for you, too
- the bread you break and the cup you share with them, is for you, too